

## The Oxford Group

“In order to be free from the tyranny of sin, and in order to gain the natural liberty of a will in harmony with the will of the universe, there must be, first and foremost, a desire for the good. Without that desire the will is powerless. But let that desire exist, however feebly or intermittently, and the enslaved will is neither helpless nor hopeless. Let that desire become the strongest and intensest longing of the heart, and not only can the will be delivered from its oppression, but a change of the will can be brought about so complete, so pervasive of the whole being, so creative in power and goodness, that it may truly be described as a new birth of the soul.”<sup>71</sup>

As William James had said, the first step in the direction of truth is man’s recognition of the wrongness in his nature. Until a man can desire the good he remains helpless and ineffectual. The Oxford Group arose to help the powerless find the needed power and so that those who had found rebirth could carry a message of hope that might change the world but one person a time. Alcoholics Anonymous was to be the child born of the Oxford Group. Can you see it?

You cannot belong to the Oxford Group. It has no membership list, subscriptions, badge, rules, or definite location. It is a name for a group of people who, from every rank, profession, and trade, in many countries, have surrendered their lives to God and who are endeavouring to lead a spiritual quality of life under the guidance the Holy Spirit.

The Oxford Group is not a religion; it has no hierarchy, no temples, no endowments; its workers have no salaries, no plans but God’s Plan; every country is their country, every man their brother.<sup>72</sup>

The working beliefs of the Group are not misty ideals; they are practical standards within the scope of any one who will give his or her life, powerful, insignificant, interesting, or prosaic as it may be, in the world, into God’s absolute keeping. There is no reason why this giving of our lives to God should mean our being pious or religious bores. Neither should it mean that we have to give up our ordinary obligations or duties. It means we surrender to God everything that stands between Him and us.

The Oxford Group has four points which are the keys to the kind of spiritual life God wishes us to lead. These points are:

1. Absolute Honesty.
2. Absolute Purity.
3. Absolute Unselfishness.
4. Absolute Love.

*“...do you give God enough uninterrupted time really to tell you what to do?”*

The Oxford Group four points are the basis of beauty of thought, word, and deed. They may not be so unattainable as we may suppose, but very few can or have ever lived lives of Absolute Honesty, Purity, Unselfishness, and Love. 'For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God', St. Paul tells us.<sup>73</sup>

Contrary to what we often hear, the Oxford Group did not have a "six step program." The Oxford Group had four practical spiritual activities that were adopted, though re-phrased in their entirety, by Alcoholics Anonymous.

To be spiritually reborn, and to live in the state in which these four points are the guides to our life in God, the Oxford Group advocate four practical spiritual activities:

1. The Sharing of our sins and temptations with another Christian life given to God, and to use Sharing as Witness to help others, still unchanged, to recognize and acknowledge their sins.
2. Surrender of our life, past, present, and future, into God's keeping and direction.
3. Restitution to all whom we have wronged directly or indirectly.
4. Listening to, accepting, relying on God's Guidance and carrying it out in everything we do or say, great or small.

These spiritual activities have proved indispensable to countless numbers who are living Changed lives. They are not new ideas nor inventions of the Oxford Group. They are the simple tenets of simple Christianity.<sup>74</sup>

In *AA Comes of Age*, the significance and power of the Oxford Group's tenets, and their influence on what was to become The Twelve Steps was revealed for all to see.

It was from him (*Sam Shoemaker*) that Dr. Bob and I in the beginning had absorbed most of the principles that were afterward embodied in the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, steps that express the heart of A.A.'s way of life. Dr. Silkworth gave us the needed knowledge of our illness, but Sam Shoemaker had given us the concrete knowledge of what we could do about it. One showed us the mysteries of the lock that held us in prison; the other passed on the spiritual keys by which we were liberated. (*not in the original*)

"...many a channel had been used by Providence to create Alcoholics Anonymous. And none had been more vitally needed than the one opened through Sam Shoemaker and his Oxford Group associates of a generation before. The basic principles which the Oxford Groupers had taught were ancient and universal ones, the common property of mankind.

*"A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit,  
neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit."*

Certain of the former O.G. attitudes and applications had proved unsuited to A.A.'s purpose...But the important thing is this: the early A.A. got its ideas of self-examination, acknowledgement of harms done, and working with others straight from the Oxford Groups and directly from Sam Shoemaker, their former leader in America and nowhere else. <sup>75</sup>

The Oxford Group "program" can best be summarized through their various "tenets" or beliefs. We have shown that the Four Absolutes and the Four Practical Spiritual Activities were at the heart of their program. We have talked previously about the 5Cs of Soul Surgery and will now add the "Five Procedures" and the "Six Assumptions" to the principles practiced by the group.

#### The 5 Procedures <sup>76</sup>

- 1) Give in to God,
- 2) Listen to God's direction,
- 3) Check guidance,
- 4) Restitution (amends)
- 5) Sharing for witness and confession.

#### The Six Assumptions <sup>77</sup>

1. Men are sinners
2. Men can be changed
3. Confession is prerequisite to change
4. The changed soul has direct access to God
5. The age of miracles is here
6. Those who have been changed must change others

A close examination of Oxford Group literature will clearly reveal what their program of action was. We can simply look to the Table of Contents of the better known Oxford Group books to see the common themes of surrender, inventory and confession, restitution for harms done and the principle of Guidance.\*

*"Ask with singleness of mind and it shall be given you;  
seek with singleness of desire and ye shall find;  
knock with singleness of purpose and it shall be opened unto you"*

\*In the foreword to the second edition of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* we find the heart and soul of the First Century Christian Fellowship's program of action that was to be adopted by A.A. identified on page xvi. "Though he could not accept all the tenets of the Oxford Groups, he was convinced of the need for moral inventory, confession of personality defects, restitution to those harmed, helpfulness to others, and the necessity of belief in and dependence upon God." For further clarification and definition we can see the actions that Bill Wilson had reviewed and taken with Ebby Thacher when Wilson was hospitalized in the Towns Hospital in December of 1934. *C.f. Alcoholics Anonymous*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition p. 13.

From *What is the Oxford Group?* written by Ralph Neale (The Layman With a Notebook) and published in 1933.<sup>78</sup>

The Oxford Group  
Sin  
Sharing for Witness and Confession  
Surrender  
Restitution  
Guidance  
The Four Absolutes  
1. Absolute Honesty  
2. Absolute Purity  
3. Absolute Unselfishness  
4. Absolute Love  
The World  
You

From *WHEN MAN LISTENS* written by Cecil Rose and first published in 1937.<sup>79</sup>

1. GOD IN CONTROL
2. LEARNING GOD'S PLAN
3. BREAKING BARRIERS AND BUILDING BRIDGES
4. LIFE CHANGING
5. CHRISTIAN REVOLUTION

From *The Eight Points Of The Oxford Group* written by C. Irving Benson and first published in 1938.<sup>80</sup>

I GOD HAS A PLAN FOR EVERY LIFE  
II CONFESSION IS GOOD FOR THE SOUL  
III IF THEY BROTHOR HAS AUGHT AGAINST THEE-  
IV THE FOUR ABSOLUTES  
V BE STILL AND KNOW  
VI DON'T BE AN ASS  
VII LIFE CHANGERS ALL  
IIIV LO, HERE IS FELLOWSHIP

The basic "tenets" of the Oxford Group as outlined in the literature of Alcoholics Anonymous can be defined as a) surrender, b) sharing for witness and confession, c) restitution and d) guidance. Rather than provide detailed explanations of each of these principles we think we can best summarize the principles of the Oxford Group from the writings of C. Irving Benson found in "*The Eight Points of The Oxford Group* from the chapter *LO, HERE IS FELLOWSHIP*.

God has plan for each one of us and He has a will for the world. That will can be known and realized if we will absolutely surrender to Him and be loving, honest, pure and unselfish. He will direct us, if we give Him a chance by making time to be quiet every morning. God will become real to us, we shall be cleansed and enter into God's sorrow for the world's sin and share His sympathy for the world's need. God's design will be made plain and all hindrances in us removed.<sup>81</sup>

As we will see in the following chapter, the Spiritual Movement that would come to be called Alcoholics Anonymous was born of the Oxford Group. The Master had taught this great truth for those who have the spiritual ear to listen and hear: "a bad tree cannot produce good fruit." Perhaps those who are extremely critical of Frank Buchman and or the Oxford Group are unable to see the beauty of the forest because they have focused too narrowly on the ugliness of but just a few of its trees.

*No man can sound the depths of his own natural peace, or rise to the heights of his own natural bliss, who is not conscious of the presence and the companionship of God.*

## NOTES

- <sup>71</sup> *MORE TWICE-BORN MEN*, p. 5
- <sup>72</sup> *What is the Oxford Group?*, *The Layman With a Notebook* – 1933 p. 6
- <sup>73</sup> *What is the Oxford Group?*, p. 8
- <sup>74</sup> *What is the Oxford Group?*, p. 9
- <sup>75</sup> *ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS COMES OF AGE*, A.A. World Services, Inc. – 1957 pp. 38 – 39
- <sup>76</sup> *NOT-GOD A History of Alcoholics Anonymous*, Ernest Kurtz – 1991 p.41
- <sup>77</sup> Ibid
- <sup>78</sup> *What is the Oxford Group?*, Contents Page
- <sup>79</sup> *WHEN MAN LISTENS*, Cecil Rose. – 1937 Contents Page
- <sup>80</sup> *The Eight Points Of The Oxford Group*, C. Irving Benson. – 1938 Contents Page
- <sup>81</sup> *The Eight Points Of The Oxford Group*, pp. 112 – 113